

Shut Up and Sing

Vocal Training Silences Your Inner Critic

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As someone who has a difficult time carrying a tune, I felt nervous going to meet with Karen Lytle, the founder of the Santa Barbara Voice Academy. My attempts to sing along to the radio are usually met with heartfelt pleas for me to shut up; what would I do if she actually asked me to sing for her?

The minute I stepped into Lytle's office my nerves were quelled. Not only is Lytle a certified vocal coach with more than 30 years of singing experience, she holds a master's degree in psychology. The small, comfortable space, keyboard in the corner, is obviously designed to relieve anxiety, with its cozy furniture and relaxing colors. Lytle herself makes me feel at home, even when I ask a somewhat silly question: Do you have to have the right traits, or can anyone learn to sing? "We all have vocal cords, lungs, diaphragms, tongues," Lytle replies. "Why couldn't you do the same thing I can do?"

The philosophy behind the Express Yourself training program is that anyone can learn to sing. It is all about exercising the muscles and vocal chords in a way most people are unused to. Just as with any athletic event, it takes practice and time. Using the Six Point Vocal Wave Method, beginning students learn how to use their diaphragms and strengthen the vocal muscles needed for volume.

To demonstrate why this is necessary, she asks me to begin singing any song. I start off in my shaky rendition of "Somebody to Love," getting a little louder once I realize my voice isn't as terrible as I had feared. After a few verses she has me stop, and asks me how that differs from the chorus. Before I can think of an answer, Lytle bursts into song, belting out "Find me somebody to love!" at a volume I couldn't match if I tried. This, she explains, is why singers need to train their diaphragms: Because songs begin at a softer volume, then crescendo with a burst of emotion. Without that climax, songs lose their power.

"No one wants a perfect singer, there's nothing interesting about a perfect singer; but if you get up and sing a song that touches your heart, you let yourself out in the song," Lytle said. "You have to bare your soul. You have to take your heart out and hold it out and say here, this is me."

Lytle applies her psychology training as an added effect in her coaching, helping people understand the mental obstacles they create against singing.

“For me, music is so healing, and it completes someone,” Lytle said. “You don’t even know you’re missing something. At various times in my life, singing has been my anti-depressant.”

When her vocal students come in for a session, she is able to help them overcome performance fears or tension. “You have certain things that happen in your life that let you know it’s either okay to be loud and expressive or it’s not,” Lytle said. “If you’re in a household where you don’t get to express yourself loudly or vocally, than you will have a particular kind of shut down, where people have actually used their vocal cords to dampen their voice.”

Being able to express yourself through singing actually has proven health benefits. Studies have shown that singing releases pain-relieving endorphins which help lower stress levels and can result in a stronger immune system. According to a study conducted by the University of Frankfurt in Germany, singing increased the number of proteins that act as antibodies, as well as anti-stress hormones—increases which did not occur when subjects were asked to listen to music without singing.

On top of having such wonderful effects on mood and health, singing is an excellent creative outlet, whether one sings by oneself or for a crowd. At the Santa Barbara Voice Academy, students begin working in private sessions with Lytle, and advance to group sessions with signs of improvement and confidence. Those who love performing get to do so on stage, in shows hosted three or four times a year at local venues, with the public encouraged to attend.

Later, visiting a group class, I watched Lytle coach a singer on stage. Looking the performer in the eyes, Lytle danced along to the beat, jumping in on a few verses to guide her student through the song. Each critique was given in a positive manner, to keep her student’s confidence up, and to help ensure that the students kept having fun while performing.

Lytle strongly encourages her students to silence the internalized critic and just enjoy singing. “What I try to do is just get people to fucking sing and be off pitch,” she said, “because chances are if you do that you will be on pitch.”

Information about the classes offered by the Santa Barbara Voice Academy can be found at expressyourselfsinging.com, and information on upcoming live performances can be found on the Express Yourself Vocal Training Facebook fan page.

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